



# Some Suggested Guidelines for Interacting with People with Disabilities



# Introduction to Guidelines

***These guidelines outline auditory, mobility (including muscular/neurological conditions), and vision disability.***

For greater details on the range of disabilities, including hidden disabilities, please go to:

**<http://eeo.gsfc.nasa.gov/disability/publications.html>**

Read the document entitled, “*People With and Without Disabilities: Interacting & Communicating*” or contact Michael Hartman the author at:

**[Michael.J.Hartman@nasa.gov](mailto:Michael.J.Hartman@nasa.gov)**

# Key Points in General

## Here are the Key Points You Should Keep in Mind

- People with disabilities have trouble with some basic life activities, such as hearing, seeing, walking, and moving.
- People avoid interacting with someone with a disability because they are afraid, uncomfortable, or lack knowledge of what is appropriate.
- Ask the individual what they need and prefer in the way of accommodations and help.
- Don't make assumptions. Just as there is no "personality type" for all people, there is also none for people with the same disability. Some people are going to be easier to work with than others.
- Remember, the person with the disability is also frustrated trying to understand and be understood.
- Above all else, don't under estimate their capability.

# Language Conveys Attitudes

- Outdated labels are inaccurate and hurtful. Here are some examples to avoid: deaf and dumb, deaf mute, wheelchair-bound, and invalid.
  - Avoid using group designations like “the blind,” “the deaf,” or “the disabled.” Speaking as if all people with a certain disability or all people with disabilities, share the same characteristics, have the same needs, or think and act the same is incorrect because it does not reflect their individuality. For example, say people who are blind, people who are deaf, people who use wheelchairs, people who have physical disabilities.
- Use “people first” language when writing or speaking about people with disabilities. For example, instead of saying the blind person, the deaf engineer, the scientist restricted to a wheel chair, say the person who is blind, the engineer who is deaf, or the scientist who uses a wheelchair. Check with the individual, however, to see what they prefer.



# Auditory—People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

## Meetings, Presentations, and Teleconferences

- Give plenty of advanced notice of meetings so interpreters can be scheduled, if needed.
- Provide written notices of meetings or events that are usually announced orally.
- Check for captioning on DVDs or videos. Configure TVs or monitors to show text onscreen.
- One person at a time should speak to avoid confusion for the interpreter or the individual trying to lip read.
- Each person should identify himself or herself by name when they speak to avoid confusion for the person with the hearing disability.
- Direct comments or questions to the individual rather than to the interpreter.

# Auditory—People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (cont.)

## General Information

- Remember, e-mail is a better way to communicate than voice mail.
- Make your presence known when entering their office by gently tapping the person's shoulder, tapping their desk, discreetly waving your hand, or flicker the room lights.
- Meet in a quiet place with sufficient lighting.
- While gesturing can be useful to communicate a phrase that cannot be otherwise understood, avoid exaggerated gestures.
- If you point to an object or in a direction, the person will probably turn to look so wait until the person looks at you again before speaking.
- Position yourself so that any bright sunlight or other light is in front of you instead of behind you.
- Keep your face out of the shadows and illuminate your face as much as possible.
- Ask them to repeat or write down what they said if you don't understand them.
- Rephrase your thought, or write it down if the person doesn't understand you.
- Face the person when meeting with them if they lip read.
- Check for understanding.
- Enunciate clearly, but try to move your lips in a natural way.

# Mobility Disability Including Muscular/Neurological Conditions

## Logistical Considerations for Meetings

- There are a wide range of physical abilities and range of motion.
- Schedule meetings in convenient locations that are accessible to the person with the physical disability.
- Make sure there are accessible bathrooms near the meeting location and no obstacles are in the way.
- Provide convenient places to sit at the meetings.
- When talking to the person, find a place to sit and talk as the person may have decreased physical stamina and endurance.

## General Suggestions

- Don't assume they need help with tasks.  
As always, ask.
- Walk alongside, and not in front of, the person if walking with a person who walks slower than you.
- Let the phone ring longer than usual to give them time to answer.
- Do not touch a person's wheelchair, crutches, cane, walker, or other assistive equipment without their permission.
- Ask the person to repeat something if their speech is difficult to understand.
- Be patient with the speed of the device if they communicate through assistive technology.

# People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision

*(Low vision, tunnel vision, and color blindness are also vision disabilities.)*

## Meetings, Presentations, and Teleconferences

- Ask each person to identify him or herself by name before speaking.
- Keep doing this until people's voices become familiar and recognizable.
- Identify the person to whom you are directing your comments or they may think you are talking to someone else.
- Read and describe all information that is included in a visual presentation so everyone understands it.
- Keep font sizes large and use contrasting colors to make reading easier.

## General Suggestions

- Say your name out loud and let the person know you are there when entering a room.
- Tell them when you are leaving.
- Speak directly to the person at a normal speed and tone of voice.
- If giving directions, use specific references such as, "two steps to your left" instead of "over there."
- Your assistance may be requested to help them move to a new location. If so, put your arm out and let them know it is there. When they take your arm, you can proceed at a comfortable pace.



# People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision (cont.)

## General Suggestions (cont.)

- Walk at a pace that is comfortable for the person. If you are unsure, ask.
- Let the person know if you are getting close to a step or other obstacle, and how you plan to navigate it.
- Orient the person to new surroundings.
- Give verbal cues like, “the chair is two steps behind you.”
- Be precise and thorough when describing people, places, or things.
- Do not pet or distract a service animal while it is working.
- Ask for directions in how to interact with the assist animal if the person offers.
- Magnification software, or other assistive technology, and e-mail are excellent ways to communicate.